



Department
for Education

The reading framework

Teaching the foundations of literacy

Section 3: Word reading and spelling

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Section 3: Word reading and spelling

Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics

To teach word reading and spelling successfully, teachers need to understand the principles underpinning the teaching of word reading (decoding) and spelling (encoding). This should include understanding how the [alphabetic code](#) (page 3) of English represents the sounds (phonemes) of the language with single letters and groups of letters (graphemes).

Phonemes

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that signals a contrast in meaning. For example:

- the difference between the words ‘gap’ and ‘cap’ is the difference between the phonemes /g/ and /k/ at the start of each word¹
- the difference between ‘fine’ and ‘fight’ is the difference between the phonemes /n/ and /t/ at the end
- the difference between ‘stale’ and ‘stile’ is the difference between the phonemes /ae/ and /igh/ in the middle of each word.

English has about 20 vowel phonemes and 24 consonant phonemes.²

Graphemes

A grapheme is a letter or group of letters that usually represents a single phoneme. A grapheme can consist of:

- one letter, for example, ‘b’ – in big
- two letters (a digraph or a split digraph), for example, ‘sh’ in ship, ‘a-e’ in make
- three letters (a trigraph), for example, ‘igh’ in light
- four letters, for example, ‘ough’ in bough, ‘eigh’ in weight.

In a few cases, one grapheme represents two phonemes, for example in the word ‘uniform’, the first grapheme ‘u’ represents /y/ and /oo/.

¹ This document shows individual letters between single quote marks and sounds between slashes. For example, the letter ‘m’ usually represents the sound /m/.

² Regional pronunciations mean that the number of phonemes cannot be fixed precisely. For example, in the south of England, ‘u’ in ‘put’ and ‘u’ in ‘but’ correspond to two different phonemes, but in the north ‘put’ and ‘but’ rhyme, so ‘u’ in ‘put’ and ‘u’ in ‘but’ correspond to the same phoneme.

The number of graphemes in a word usually corresponds to the number of phonemes – hence the term ‘grapheme-phoneme correspondence’ (GPC). To simplify the language for parents and children, some programmes use the terms ‘letter-sound correspondences’ or ‘letter-sounds’ to refer to GPCs.

The alphabetic code

Letters are a code, a way of writing down the sounds of speech.

Phonemes are the *basis* of the code, and the letters *are* the code.³

English has a complex alphabetic code: 26 alphabet letters have to do duty, singly or in combination, to represent the 44 or so sounds (phonemes) of English and they do so inconsistently. In Spanish, German and Welsh, for instance, one grapheme almost always represents the same phoneme. English, however, has more than 70 common correspondences between phonemes and graphemes and hundreds of rare ones.

History of the English alphabetic code

Our complex alphabetic code has come about because English has absorbed many different languages (and, to a small extent, alphabets) through religion, invasion, trade and other reasons. The language continues to change, absorbing more words and generating entirely new vocabulary.

Since, at first, people spelt words as they said them or heard them and the pronunciation of words has changed over time, it is not surprising that many different spellings have existed for a single word. The word ‘night’, for instance, has been spelt as *naecht*, *naeht*, *nahht*, *nyht*, *nycht*, *nieht*, *nighte* – and in other ways.

Current spellings may also reflect a word’s origins. The word ‘yacht’ was possibly originally a Dutch word. The sounds we hear now are: /y/ /o/ /t/. The first and last sounds are straightforward to spell; it is only the spelling of the middle sound that is unusual, because ‘ach’ is now pronounced /o/.⁴

Dr Samuel Johnson’s dictionary of 1755 was probably the most influential factor in the reforming and standardising of English spelling, although it did bring some issues.

³ McGuinness D (2004). ‘Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tell Us about How to Teach Reading’ Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, page 13

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary refers to this word’s spellings as having been ‘various and erratic’ since its first recorded appearance in print in the 16th century.

The words the language has absorbed is one reason why, in reading and in spelling English, the relationship of graphemes to phonemes is like this:

1. one grapheme usually represents a single phoneme⁵
2. different graphemes can be used to represent the same phoneme
3. a grapheme can represent different phonemes in different words (although this is less common).

This table gives examples.

Summary table English alphabetic code		
1. One grapheme usually represents a single phoneme		
Description of example	Grapheme	Example word
Graphemes (of one, two, three and four letters) represent a single phoneme ⁶	b	<u>big</u>
	sh	<u>fish</u>
	air	<u>hair</u>
	augh	<u>caught</u>
2. Different graphemes can be used to represent the same phoneme		
Description of example	Grapheme	Example word
Graphemes (of one or more vowel and consonant letters) represent the single phoneme /o:/	o	<u>old</u>
	oa	<u>boat</u>
	ow	<u>crow</u>
	oe	<u>toe</u>
	o-e	<u>stone</u>
	ough	<u>dough</u>

⁵ An exception is 'x', representing the two phonemes /k/ and /s/, as in 'fox': /f/ /o/ /k/ /s/.

⁶ Note that a consonant cluster such as 's' 't' and 'r' at the start of 'street' consists of three separate phonemes: /s/, /t/ and /r/.

	oh	<u>oh</u>
	eau	plate <u>au</u>
3. A grapheme can represent different phonemes in different words (less common)		
Description of example	Grapheme	Phoneme
The grapheme 'ea' represents three different phonemes in three unrelated words	<u>ne</u> at	/ee/
	h <u>ea</u> d	/e/
	gr <u>ea</u> t	/a-e/

Phonics gives children the key to unlocking this alphabetic code for their reading and spelling. This is why teaching phonics for reading and spelling is a cornerstone of the programmes of study for English in the national curriculum.

Many publishers produce one or more alphabetic code charts for classroom display, illustrating the correspondences between phonemes and graphemes.

The appendices include an alphabetic code chart (see 'Appendix 4' in [The reading framework: teaching the foundations of literacy](#)) for adults, listing the main phonemes in English, with example words.

Synthetic phonics

Phonics is a body of knowledge that is necessary for children to learn to read and spell. Because of the complex alphabetic code of English, children are taught explicitly the correspondences between letters and sounds (graphemes and phonemes), as well as the skill of blending the individual sounds together to read. The term 'synthetic' phonics refers to the verb 'synthesise', meaning 'to combine'. The skill of segmenting words into their individual sounds is needed for spelling.

Word reading and spelling are 'reversible processes'.⁷ Reading involves blending sounds to say a whole word; spelling involves segmenting a whole word to identify the sounds in it.

⁷ Rose J (2006). ['Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report'](#) Department for Education and Skills

Evidence shows that teaching phonics is the best way to teach children to read, e.g. the EEF considers phonics to be one of the most secure and best-evidenced areas of pedagogy, recommending all schools use a systematic approach to teaching it. There is convincing evidence of the value of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), including the seven-year study by Johnston and Watson undertaken in Clackmannanshire, published in 2005, which has been especially influential in England.⁸

In the United States, a seminal national study in 2000 described how:

... synthetic phonics programs produced stronger growth in reading than control programs in most of the different reader groups...

The impact was 'significantly greater for at-risk kindergartners and first graders'. The authors concluded that 'synthetic phonics programs were especially effective for younger, at-risk readers'.⁹ The same alphabetic code underlies reading and writing in English regardless of differences between children.

In England, the national curriculum requires maintained schools to teach reading using systematic phonics.¹⁰ When inspecting the curriculum, Ofsted's inspectors evaluate the extent to which the 'teaching [of] early reading and synthetic phonics is systematic and ensures that all children learn to read words and simple sentences accurately by the end of Reception'.¹¹

Decoding (word reading)

To decode words (see [Section 1](#)), children are taught to look at graphemes in written words from left to right and to say each corresponding phoneme in turn. Then they blend the phonemes to say the whole word.

Children:

1. see the written word 'cat'
2. say the corresponding three phonemes /k/ /a/ /t/

⁸ Johnston R. and Watson J (2005). 'The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment: a seven year longitudinal study' Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Central Research Unit. Also see <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/phonics/technical-appendix/>

⁹ Shriver EK (2000). National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. 'Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: reports of the subgroups (00-4754)' Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office

¹⁰ Department for Education (2013). '[The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013](#)' London: Department for Education

¹¹ Ofsted (2021). '[School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005](#)' Manchester: Ofsted

- blend the three phonemes to say the word 'cat'.

Children:

- see the written word 'sheep'
- say the corresponding three phonemes /sh/ /ee/ /p/
- blend the three phonemes to say the word 'sheep'.

The pronunciation of some words might need tweaking once the sound has been pronounced. For example, a child reading 'mountain' for the first time might pronounce the 'ai' as a long sound, but then recognise they have heard the word and pronounce it more naturally.

Many children need extra support to blend words with consonant clusters, particularly when they occur at the start of words. Consonant clusters (also known as 'adjacent consonants' or 'consonant blends') consist of separate phonemes and children should be taught to pronounce each one before blending them.

Example word	Phonemes in word (total)	Phonemes in consonant cluster
s-p-i-n	4	/s/ /p/
c-l-u-m-p	5	/c/ /l/ and /m/ /p/
ch-o-m-p	4	/m/ /p/
s-p-l-a-sh	5	/s/ /p/ /l/
s-t-r-ee-t	5	/s/ /t/ /r/
th-r-ee	3	/th/ /r/
f-l-air	3	/f/ /l/

To support children to blend phonemes into words, it helps if teachers pronounce the sounds as purely and clearly as possible (see 'Appendix 5: Pronouncing phonemes' in [The reading framework: teaching the foundations of literacy](#)). SSP programmes provide guidance.

Encoding (spelling)

To encode words, children are taught to identify the phonemes in spoken words first. This is also referred to as 'segmenting' spoken words. Then they write the graphemes that represent the phonemes.

Children:

1. hear the spoken word 'dog'
2. say 'dog' – /d/ /o/ /g/
3. write the three corresponding graphemes 'd', 'o', 'g' to spell the word 'dog'.

Children:

1. hear the spoken word 'goat'
2. say 'goat' – /g/ /oe/ /t/
3. write the three corresponding graphemes, 'g', 'oa', 't' to spell the word 'goat'.

It is more difficult for children to spell 'goat' than 'dog', because the sound /oe/ has different common spellings from which they must choose.

Children learn to read more quickly than they learn to spell correctly. This is why their progress in reading must not be held back by whether or not they can spell accurately. The national curriculum also says that reading and spelling should be taught alongside one another, 'so that pupils understand that they can read back words they have spelt'.¹²

The more graphemes children learn to read and write, the more words they will be able to read and spell, and, as they decode unfamiliar words, they encounter new vocabulary.

Young readers encounter words that they have not seen before much more frequently than experienced readers do, and they may not know the meaning of some of these. Practice at reading such words by sounding and blending can provide opportunities not only for pupils to develop confidence in their decoding skills, but also for teachers to explain the meaning and thus develop pupils' vocabulary.¹³

Phonics continues to play an important role in spelling, even after key stage 1, because 'teachers should still draw pupils' attention to GPCs that do and do not fit in with what has been taught so far' in terms of spelling.¹⁴

¹² Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

¹³ Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

¹⁴ Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

As they are taught to spell, children have opportunities to practise writing the letters they have been shown how to form.

Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programmes

Synthetic phonic programmes have one thing in common: they teach children GPCs, to blend phonemes into spoken words and segment spoken words into phonemes. However, programmes use programme-specific systems and terminology such as actions, mnemonics, prompts, key words and routines to teach knowledge and skills. It is important not to confuse children by mixing material from different programmes or across different classrooms – hence the phrase ‘fidelity to the programme’. For example, one programme might use the term ‘split digraph’, while another might refer to ‘magic e’ for the same vowel GPC in a word such as ‘late’.

Teaching grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs)

Programme writers select which GPCs they are going to prioritise for teaching, as well as their order, so that the GPCs generate the most words at each stage of the programme.

Most programmes start with a simple code: approximately one grapheme for each of the 44 or so phonemes (maybe including a few common alternative spellings such as ‘c’, ‘k’ and ‘ck’ for the sound /k/).

A complex code follows, starting with the most common alternative graphemes. As the programme introduces more graphemes, the number of words a child can read increases rapidly.

Some programmes continue to teach phonics for spelling, once children can read, including teaching further morphemes, as well as GPCs.

Common exception words

Programmes include a few common exception words to enable children to read texts. These words are kept to a minimum in the early stages, for example:

said to was I the me no of all he you
they she we are my be some so were go no

The national curriculum refers to these as ‘common exception words’ (sometimes referred to as ‘tricky words’), because they contain GPCs that are unusual or have not yet been taught. Children are taught to read and spell these by noting the part that is an exception to what they have been taught so far. For example, in the word ‘said’, ‘s’ and ‘d’ correspond to the phonemes /s/ and /d/ as usual, but ‘ai’ corresponds to the phoneme /e/, which is unusual.

High frequency words

Children should not be asked to learn lists of high frequency words. They can read most of these in the usual way, by saying the sounds and blending them, when they have learnt the GPCs in the words, e.g. 'mum' and 'came'. Synthetic phonics programmes teach others systematically as exception words, e.g. 'said' and 'to'.

Capital and lower-case letters

Programmes teach that each lower-case letter has a corresponding capital letter; they share the letter name and represent the same sound. Children are taught, for example, that both 'a' and 'A' are called /æ/ and are pronounced /a/. Some programmes teach the names of letters only once children have learnt to say the sounds.

'Decodable' books and texts

Experienced readers can decode the specialist words in a book about advanced physics, even if they cannot understand them. However, most texts are not decodable for children who are beginning to learn to read.

The national curriculum says that pupils should be taught to:

... read aloud accurately books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words.¹⁵

This is why schools should invest in books that have been carefully structured in cumulative steps for children learning to read, so that they can decode every word as their knowledge of the alphabetic code increases. These books are often referred to simply as 'decodable' books.

¹⁵ Department for Education (2013). [The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013](#) London: Department for Education

Audit: Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics

	Current practice
Teachers understand the nature of the English alphabetic code.	
Teachers understand the principles underpinning a programme of synthetic phonics.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Teaching a systematic programme

Daily phonics sessions should begin as soon as children start their Reception year. Learning to read and write letters develops phonemic awareness rapidly. It seems easier for children to identify phonemes in words when they know how they correspond to letters, because letters provide visible and concrete symbols for sounds.¹⁶

Phonics sessions might be only ten minutes long in the first few days. However, by the end of Reception children will need about an hour a day to consolidate previous learning, learn new content and practise and apply what they have learnt, maybe split into different sessions for different activities.

High-quality class or group teaching is an efficient and effective way of ensuring good progress for the majority of children, 'given the expense and impracticality of

¹⁶ Some evidence supports using letters from an early stage, including 'PA [phonemic awareness] instruction with letters produced larger effects on PA and reading than instruction without letters', Ehri LC and others (2001). '[Phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis](#)' Reading Research Quarterly: volume 36, number 3, page 255. Also see Johnston R and Watson J (2004). 'Accelerating the development of reading, spelling and phonemic awareness skills in initial readers' Reading and writing: an interdisciplinary journal: volume 17, number 4, pages 327–357

delivering instruction individually'.¹⁷ This should not undermine, however, the value of one-to-one or small-group support for the few children who need extra help to keep up (see [Section 4](#)).

When teachers are engaging and motivating, children mirror their teacher's mood and attitude, pay attention and enjoy learning. Teachers should:

- be clear about objectives for any session and make sure that the children understand them (e.g. 'By the end of this week you will all be able to read these sounds; today we are learning the first one.')
- expect all children to participate throughout phonics sessions, for example by using 'call and response'
- make the most of the time for teaching and use activities that maximise the number of words children read and spell
- make sure that children practise using the knowledge they have been taught in previous lessons until they can use it automatically, thus freeing up their capacity to learn new knowledge
- support the children to connect the new knowledge with their previous learning
- demonstrate new learning in bite-sized chunks
- ensure children are given opportunities to apply what they have learnt
- praise the children for working hard and paying attention, being specific about what they have done well
- use assessment to determine next steps clearly, including identifying children who might need immediate extra support.¹⁸

Direct teaching

All children should take part in high-quality phonics sessions. For some of the time, the teacher should teach directly. All the children should participate by listening and responding, and by practising and applying what they are learning.

For reading, children should:

- revise GPCs taught in earlier sessions
- be taught new GPCs
- practise reading words containing those GPCs

¹⁷ Ehri LC and others (2001). 'Systematic phonics instruction helps students learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis' Review of Educational Research: volume 71, number 3, pages 393–447

¹⁸ Ofsted (2021). '[School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005](#)' Manchester: Ofsted

- be taught how to read common exception words
- practise reading ‘decodable’ phrases, sentences and books that match the GPCs and exception words they already know.

For writing (spelling and handwriting), children should:

- practise segmenting spoken words into their individual sounds
- choose which letter or letters to represent each sound
- practise a correct pencil grip
- be taught the correct start and exit points for each letter, which should not include ‘lead-in’ strokes from the line (see below)
- respond to dictation from the teacher, practising writing words in sentences that include only the GPCs and exception words they have learnt.

Dictation is a vital part of a phonics session. Writing simple dictated sentences that include words taught so far gives children opportunities to practise and apply their spelling, without their having to think about what it is they want to say.

At other times, the children should be given tasks that allow them to practise and apply what they have been taught to read and write independently, while the teacher identifies and helps those who need more support.

A systematic programme is essential for teaching phonics. Opportunities sometimes arise, however, to teach more. When that happens, teachers can respond naturally and briefly. For example, after teaching that /j/ is represented with ‘j’, George might say that his name has the same sound but no ‘j’. The teacher could praise his careful listening and show him how ‘ge’ in his name represents /j/.

Handwriting

Learning to form letters and spell words requires considerable effort and attention. Schools, therefore, should consider the advantages to children of delaying the teaching of joined handwriting. Nearly all the headteachers in the schools Ofsted visited for its ‘Bold beginnings’ survey did not teach a cursive or pre-cursive script in Reception. They told inspectors that they believed:

... it slowed down children’s writing, at a point when they already found manual dexterity tricky and the muscles in their shoulders, arms and hands were still developing.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ofsted (2017). [‘Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

Written composition

Children's writing generally develops at a slower pace than their reading. Before they can write independently in a way that can be read by others, they need to know:

- what they want to say
- how to identify sounds in words
- at least one way to spell each of the sounds of English
- how to form letters.

With plenty of practice in writing from dictation, children will find it easier to write independently. Then they can begin to write down their ideas. However, expecting children to write at length early on results in cognitive overload and might damage their motivation to write, both at this stage and later. Extra time for writing is unnecessary at this early stage.

At first, teachers should support children to compose sentences out loud, without requiring them to write. As their spelling develops, they can begin to write sentences using the GPCs they have been taught so far, spelling some words in a phonically plausible way, even if sometimes incorrectly, for example: 'me and my frens went in a cafai and had caix'.

As children's knowledge of the alphabetic code increases, teachers should encourage correct spelling.

Resources

Well-organised teaching spaces allow children to focus on what they are learning.²⁰ Resources for children to refer to should be in a place where they can find or see them easily.

Phonics should be taught in a quiet space. Children need to have the best chance to hear clearly and pay attention, because extraneous noise hinders their progress. Researchers have also found that highly decorated walls in primary schools undermine children's ability to concentrate and absorb teachers' instructions.²¹

²⁰ Fisher AV and others (2014). 'Visual environment, attention allocation, and learning in young children: when too much of a good thing may be bad' Association for Psychological Science: volume 25, issue 7

²¹ Burnet K (2014). ['Study Shows Classroom Decor Can Distract From Learning'](#)

A large carpet close to the teacher enables young children to sit easily during direct teaching, while tables and chairs allow them to sit and write properly, without balancing materials on their laps.

Letter cards, friezes and posters showing GPCs should match the phonic programme the school has chosen.

‘Decodable’ books and texts for children to read

A systematic phonics programme includes sufficient ‘decodable’ books or texts, so that children can practise, at school and at home, their increasing knowledge of GPCs and their blending skill in meaningful contexts.

‘Decodable’ books and other texts make children feel successful from the very beginning. They do not encounter words that include GPCs they have not been taught. If an adult is not present, they are not forced to guess from pictures, the context, the first letters of a word or its shape (for example see ‘Appendix 6: Decodable texts’ in [The reading framework: teaching the foundations of literacy](#)). ‘Decodable’ books and texts that children read should run alongside or a little behind the teaching of the GPCs, so that they always feel a sense of achievement when they are asked to read such books.²²

It is important that children practise their reading with ‘decodable’ books or texts. They speed up the time they need to gain sufficient accuracy to read a wide range of children’s literature. It is helpful, therefore, if teachers explain to families how they can help their children to read such books when they bring them home.

Organising ‘decodable’ books

Ofsted has reported that in some schools visited for its ‘Bold beginnings’ survey:

... developing children’s reading accuracy was hindered by the way [the schools] organised their reading books into bands. These schools mixed a range of reading schemes, bought at various times, many of which used different approaches to the teaching of reading. Inspectors found that this did not ensure that children read books at the right level of difficulty.²³

So that beginner readers read books at the right level of difficulty, teachers should make sure their organisation of the books matches exactly the order in which GPCs are introduced in the programme. For example, a book that includes the word ‘play’

²² Programmes might also provide other written material (such as simple sentences) that reflects this.

²³ Ofsted (2017). [‘Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

should be placed so that children are not asked to read it until the digraph 'ay' has been taught.

Activities that can hinder learning

If children do not practise reading and writing enough, they fail to make sufficient progress. Activities must be high quality, practical, efficient and focused on the main goal – reading and spelling using phonics.

Children enjoy well-designed activities that focus on phonics. They feel successful and recognise that they are learning to read and write.

Examples of activities that can hinder learning

Activities such as painting, colouring, modelling, playing in the sand and water tray are valuable for developing language, knowledge, cooperative play, fine motor skills, imagination and creativity. Using them as vehicles for practising phonics not only takes away the integrity of the activities but also does not provide sufficient practice in word reading, for example, when 'fishing' for words in a water tray, or painting or making models of letters.

A failure to make sure that all children are participating fully can hinder learning by limiting the amount of time for practice. For instance, sometimes only one child practises reading while the others are expected only to watch and listen without otherwise joining in. Other similar examples include:

- asking one child to write on the board while others watch
- asking children to take turns to read letters and words
- taking feedback from individual children
- playing games that involve turn-taking, e.g. 'Phonic Bingo' or 'What's in the box?'

Some practices may confuse children, make it more difficult than necessary for them to learn or discourage them, such as when the teacher:

- asks children to write independently, before they have the necessary skills: they do not know how to do it
- corrects spelling without appreciating that a child has identified a sound correctly, but not the correct grapheme

- demonstrates phonically plausible but incorrect spellings: the danger is the children may remember the wrong spelling²⁴
- asks children to identify and count sounds in a spoken word after reading it: identifying sounds in a spoken word is important for spelling but not for reading
- tells a story about a sound or letter with so much detail that children focus on the story more than on what they need to learn.

Poor classroom routines can also get in the way of learning, especially when:

- routines and activities change frequently and too much time is lost in explanations
- children are seated where they cannot see the teacher's face or resources and therefore cannot pay full attention
- children are not shown how to use the classroom's posters and charts for support when they are reading and spelling
- displays about reading and writing are overly elaborate so that children cannot use them effectively
- posters and charts other than from the school's selected phonics programme are used to decorate the classroom.

Finally, sitting on the floor and writing on a mini-whiteboard does not help children learn to hold a pencil and form letters correctly. To write, they should sit comfortably on a chair at a table. Using a whiteboard also means there is no paper record of the work, for the child, the teacher, or the parent.

The report of the Rose Review drew attention to 'weak practice in schools that were otherwise generally effective in teaching phonic work' and stressed the need for 'vigilance in ensuring consistently high quality'.²⁵

²⁴ An adult who knows how to spell should not show children spellings that are phonically plausible but incorrect, even if simply demonstrating to them.

²⁵ Rose J (2006). ['Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report'](#) Department for Education and Skills

Audit: Teaching a systematic programme

	Current practice
The school has adopted a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme.	
Direct teaching of phonics takes place every day for all children from the start of the Reception year.	
Interactive lessons ensure all children participate fully.	
Children are taught correct letter formation and practise it daily.	
Children are given tasks that allow them to practise and apply what they have been taught.	
Children practise reading only with books that are decodable for them at that stage of their learning.	
Children read a decodable book or other decodable text most days.	
Resources are organised effectively.	
The organisation of books matches the order in which the phonics programme introduces grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) and exception words.	
Enough books are available at each stage of the phonics programme for children to practise reading.	
Teachers are aware of activities that might hinder children's progress in learning to read and write.	

<p>Parents are informed about the phonics programme: what is taught; how they could provide extra practice to develop accuracy and fluency; how the school will support children to keep up from the start through extra practice.</p>	
<p>Actions to be taken (by term)</p>	

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

The wide range of learning difficulties experienced by children with identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can have a significant impact on children’s and young people’s access to the curriculum. This section concentrates on good practice for those with moderate to severe SEND and complex needs, most (but not all) of whom will be in specialist provision.

Literacy is as important for these children as for their peers and teachers should be ambitious about teaching them to read and write. These children have to navigate the same written language, unlock the same alphabetic code, learn the same skills, and learn and remember the same body of knowledge as their peers. It is a critical skill in helping them prepare for adulthood.

Schools are expected to enable access to appropriate phonics instruction for children with complex needs. Under the Equality Act 2010, they are required to make reasonable adjustments to enable pupils with disabilities to have full access to the curriculum and to be able to participate in it.

Consensus is growing among academics and teachers that the best reading instruction for children with SEND is SSP, taught by direct instruction. They can learn to read and write and can make progress towards or attain functional literacy.

In a 2021 French study of children with learning disabilities, Sermier said:

These findings suggest that students with [special educational needs] benefit from phonics-based programs integrating research-based approaches and techniques.²⁶

Similarly, a recent systematic review for children with autism by Arcuili and Bailey concluded:

...comprehensive instruction that incorporates [phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency and reading comprehension]...is not only appropriate for children with autism but also effective.²⁷

The view that children learn in different ways is under scrutiny. Dehaene has said:

...it is simply not true that there are hundreds of ways to learn to read. Every child is unique... but when it comes to reading we all have roughly the same brain that imposes the same constraints and the same learning sequence.²⁸

Evidence suggests that most children with moderate to severe and complex needs are not 'visual learners', as previously thought. Trembath, for instance, in a small study, found 'no evidence of a prominent visual learning style in children with ASD,'²⁹ while Kathy Cologon has noted that, for children with Down's syndrome:

Sight-word learning on its own is insufficient for reading development and teaching with this approach alone is contrary to current evidence-based practices in literacy instruction.³⁰

SSP, rather than a whole-word approach, provides children with moderate to severe and complex needs the best opportunity to gain functional literacy. Children who have a hearing or visual impairment are generally able to access phonics teaching if they have some hearing or vision.

Instruction should be accessible to all these children. Teachers should:

²⁶ Sermier D and others (2021). 'Effects of a phonics-based intervention on the reading skills of students with intellectual disability' *Research in Developmental Disabilities*: volume 111

²⁷ Arcuili J and Bailey B (2021). 'The promise of comprehensive early reading instruction for children with autism and recommendations for future directions' *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*: volume 52, issue 1, pages 225-238

²⁸ Dehaene S (2009). 'Reading in the Brain' London: Penguin Random House

²⁹ Trembath D and others (2015). 'Accurate or Assumed: Visual Learning in Children with ASD' *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*: volume 45, pages 3276-3287

³⁰ Cologon K (2013). 'Debunking myths: Reading development in children with Down Syndrome' *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*: volume 38, number 3

- provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to read and spell, by direct instruction, progressing systematically with carefully structured, small and cumulative steps
- use instructional routines that become familiar
- provide materials that limit distraction; are clear, linear and easy to follow; are age-neutral or age-appropriate and can be adapted further, such as being reduced to individual items
- provide opportunities for work on vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension
- provide multiple opportunities for overlearning (recall, retrieval, practice and application at the level of the alphabetic code, word, sentence and text).

Teaching should:

- be at a suitable pace for the child because progression through a programme will be much slower than for their typically developing peers
- be daily, with well-paced, well-planned lessons that are engaging and motivating
- take full account of the child's individual strengths, weaknesses, knowledge and understanding, and profile of needs.

Some children may need additional strategies, such as for those who:

- have physical disabilities that affect their fine motor control for holding and manipulating objects, e.g. use of desktop manipulatives, alternative writing strategies
- are pre- or non-verbal, e.g. use of alternative communication strategies, such as selecting their response from auditory choices anchored to visual symbols or place-markers
- have both fine motor difficulties and are pre- or non-verbal, e.g. use of low- or high-tech eye gaze strategies.

A very few children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) might not be able to access direct literacy instruction, but might access alternative activities to teach children how letters correspond to sounds within the context of a pre-formal sensory curriculum.

Developing fluency

Fluent decoding allows us to understand what we read. Because the reader has gained accuracy and automaticity in word reading, the brain's resources are available to focus on lifting the meaning from the page: connecting the words,

sentences and text. As children gain fluency, their motivation increases: they start to enjoy reading more and are willing to do more of it.

Fluency: speed and accuracy

Researchers generally define and measure fluency in terms of the number of words read correctly per minute. Accuracy as well as speed influences fluency; it is not just about the speed at which a child reads.³¹ The national curriculum refers to pupils reading words comprising the year 1 GPCs 'accurately and speedily', reflecting this concept of fluency.³²

Fluency gives the reader the choice to read at a speed that allows for comprehension and can be adapted to the purpose of the reading. Beginner readers, however, do not have a choice about speed because they are still engaged in decoding the words on the page.

Children do not pass through a magic barrier and suddenly become fluent. There is no point in children reading speedily if the words they read are wrong – for example, if they read 'place' for 'palace'. Equally, accuracy on its own is not useful, unless they can read at a sufficient rate to support comprehension. Both accuracy and speed are essential.

However, practising to gain automaticity in decoding needs to focus on accuracy. This means children must first work out a word by sounding and blending. Most of them have to do this several times before they can read it accurately 'at a glance'. Re-reading a text, therefore, gradually increases the number of words in it that they can read 'at a glance'. Urging children to read at speed will not increase their fluency: they can read only at the speed they can decode.

Progressive fluency

Many factors contribute to fluency. Maryanne Wolf reached the 'unsettling conclusion' that:

³¹ Juul H, Poulsen M and Elbro C (2014). '[Separating speed from accuracy in beginning reading development](#)' Journal of Educational Psychology: volume 106, issue 4, pages 1096-1106

³² 'Fluency is typically measured as the number of words read correctly per minute. Thus defined, fluency is by definition influenced by accuracy as well as speed, and not a pure measure of speed.' Juul H, Poulsen M and Elbro C (2014). '[Separating speed from accuracy in beginning reading development](#)' Journal of Educational Psychology: volume 106, issue 4, pages 1096-1106

reading fluency involves every process and subskill involved in reading. ... [It] is influenced by the development of rapid rates of processing in all the components of reading.³³

It might be helpful to consider the idea of progressive rather than absolute fluency. The teacher helps children to gain reading fluency at each stage, in the same way that a piano teacher helps a pupil to gain musical fluency at each grade.

The piano teacher supports the child to practise playing a piece of music fluently at that grade. Once the child can play the piece automatically, the teacher draws attention to the expression marks and the phrasing. Together they decide how the piece will be performed. At each grade, the complexity of the music increases, but the actual process of becoming fluent remains the same.

Recognising familiar words 'at a glance'

Some children can decode a word by sounding and blending once; later, whenever they come across the same word, they read it 'at a glance'. Most children, however, have to decode a word several times in different contexts before it becomes familiar enough to read 'at a glance'. Children with poor short-term memories need to practise decoding a word many more times before they can read it 'at a glance'.

Children learn to read words 'at a glance' more easily if, when they first decode a word by saying the sounds and blending them, they know what it means: the written word is a label for what the spoken word represents. A child therefore might be more likely to read 'dog' 'at a glance' than 'cog', and 'splash' rather than 'stash'.

The more words children can read 'at a glance', the sooner they see beyond the word as consisting of a series of letters to decode and can focus on what it means.

One teacher with one child

Teachers rarely have the time to listen to children reading individually. However, if they did, the teacher could choose a book closely matched to the GPCs the child knew, and the number of words the child would be likely to be able to read 'at a glance'. The teacher would start by showing interest in the book, connecting it to something the child knew about or had read before.

The teacher would expect the child to sound out unfamiliar words and would praise them for doing so. The teacher might re-read a sentence or a page to the child to help them keep track of what was going on and explain the meaning of a word in the

³³ Wolf M and Katzir-Cohen T (2001). ['Reading fluency and its intervention'](#) Scientific Studies of Reading: volume 5, issue 3, pages 211-239

context of the story. Sometimes they might re-read sections together. At the end of the reading, the teacher might say, 'You could read this to your dad tonight. He'll be so impressed'. Above all, the teacher would make the process interactive and meaningful.

The next day, they might start a new book together or re-read the same book so the child could read more words 'at a glance' and notice more of what they were reading.

One teacher with many children

However, classroom teachers do not usually have the advantage of listening to one child read at a time. They need to replicate, for the whole class, what they would do with just one. This means:

- deciding how to organise children into groups so they can practise reading a 'decodable' book or text. This might be within the main class or group phonic lesson, or in groups throughout the day
- choosing the book or text that matches most closely the GPCs that the group knows and taking account of the children's ability to blend the sounds in words that are unfamiliar
- noting which words might need explaining
- clarifying the purpose of any re-readings: to increase the number of words children can read 'at a glance', or perhaps to discuss the plot of the story, the characters and their motives
- deciding which 'decodable' book the children will take home to read.

As their knowledge of GPCs and the words they can read 'at a glance' increases, the children can gradually read longer books.

They will also learn to draw on other knowledge of words, for example, common spelling patterns, such as the morphemes 'un-', '-ing', '-ly' and '-ed'. Eventually, they will no longer need the support of books deliberately structured to be decodable for beginners and will be able to read any age-appropriate literature.

Importantly, by practising reading every day, the children refine the vital processing they have to do. They are fluent readers only when they can read at a speed that allows them to understand the text they are reading.

Audit: Developing fluency

	Current practice
Teachers understand why fluency is essential for children's reading comprehension.	
Accurate decoding is assured before children move on to read a new book.	
The meaning of new words is explained to children to increase their vocabulary and accelerate their reading of words 'at a glance'.	
Children sometimes, from the earliest stage, re-read books to practise and improve their fluency.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Assessment

Close and regular assessment of children as they learn to read is vital if teaching is to match their capacity to learn and if difficulties are to be identified when they first arise, and overcome.³⁴

Formative and summative assessment

Once teachers are expert in teaching the school's chosen phonics programme, they can pay attention to children's misconceptions and adjust teaching minute by minute through the lesson: reviewing a GPC; repeating a step to support blending; directing attention to a child who has lost focus. This is formative assessment.

³⁴ Ofsted (2010). ['Reading by six. How the best schools do it'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

In contrast, the aims of summative assessment are about providing:

- teachers with information about what each child has learnt in a given period
- leaders with information about which children might benefit from additional support.

It is essential that leaders act on the information from assessment and understand ‘the connectedness of curriculum, teaching, assessment and standards’.³⁵

Summative assessments, therefore, should also indicate to leaders which teachers might benefit from additional practice and coaching (see [Section 5](#)) to improve outcomes for children.

Summative assessments might be termly or half-termly. It is up to schools to decide, on the basis of the guidance in the phonics programme they have chosen, at what points they collect such information. What is important is that they are clear about ‘what they are drawing from their data and how that informs their curriculum and teaching’.³⁶

Teachers should use their programme’s phonic assessments to check for gaps in children’s knowledge. They should then provide further practice for them in reading words with the specific GPCs that they have not yet learnt fully and then blending them.

Individual records of progress – not simply group records – are vital, particularly for children who are at risk of not meeting the expected standard of the phonics screening check and failing to learn to read.

The phonics screening check

The government introduced its statutory phonics screening check in September 2011 for all children in year 1. Its purpose is to assess whether children can read accurately a selection of words that include common GPCs: the first step in learning to read. It does not aim to assess reading comprehension or whether a child can read familiar words speedily or decode unfamiliar ones easily.

³⁵ Ofsted (2021). [‘School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

³⁶ Ofsted (2021). [‘School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

The check is a short, light-touch assessment, based on the Standards and Testing Agency's assessment framework.³⁷ It takes about five minutes for a teacher or other trained adult to conduct with each child.

The child is asked to read 20 real words and 20 pseudo-words. Pseudo-words have been described as 'the purest measure' of decoding ability.³⁸ Because they have no meaning (in English), they allow for specific assessment of how well children can use their knowledge of GPCs and their blending skill, independently of any knowledge of the word, and how well they might work out unfamiliar words in their reading. (The check does not use pseudo-words that sound the same as a real word; for example, it would not include the pseudo-word 'bote'.)

Teachers should not ask children to read lots of pseudo-words to prepare for the phonics check. Instead, they should have as many opportunities as possible to practise their phonic knowledge and blending skill on reading familiar and unfamiliar real words.

The screening check has been developed systematically, for a specific purpose, and uses different graphemes in varying sequences from year to year, in line with the requirements of the assessment framework. Not all the GPCs that a teacher needs to assess will be included in any one year's check, so previous screening check papers are not an effective way to identify accurately the GPCs that need further practice or to track children's progress.

The children who do not meet the expected standard are screened again in year 2.

The results from the screening check are not published at school level. However, Ofsted's inspectors use them, alongside a school's policy for teaching reading, its assessments of phonics, and their observations of lessons as part of how they inspect reading.

The phonics screening check: only the first step

Meeting the expected standard of the check does not mean that children are now readers. Many children may have read the words in it very slowly, even if they met the expected standard, because speed is not part of it.³⁹ They still need considerable

³⁷ Standards and Testing Agency (2012). ['Assessment framework for the development of the Year 1 phonics screening check. For test developers'](#) London: STA

³⁸ Gough PB and Tunmer WE (1986). 'Decoding, reading and reading disability' Remedial and Special Education: volume 7, issue 6

³⁹ The two children who read 'plastic' slowly but successfully at the end of the training video for the check illustrate that speed of decoding is not a criterion.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-sample-materials-and-training-video>

practice in decoding unfamiliar words speedily and reading familiar words 'at a glance'. They also need practice to build up stamina in their reading before they leave the security of books they know they will be able to decode. It is therefore important to find out if they can read books at the later stages of the school's phonic programme at a pace that allows them to focus on what they are reading.

The Standards and Testing Agency says that around 90 words per minute is a good indicator of when children 'start to read with sufficient fluency to focus on their understanding'. However, it also says that some children might read more slowly than this while still being able to understand what they are reading.⁴⁰

Assessing reading comprehension

While children are learning to read, most of their attention and working memory are directed to decoding words. '[Decodable' books](#) (page 10) and other material written for them to practise reading are likely to be below the level of what they can actually understand.⁴¹

They are also unlikely to be reading at a speed that is sufficient for them to focus on the meaning of what is written on the page. It is therefore neither necessary nor desirable to assess their reading comprehension using summative assessments before they are reading fluently.

This is why, when children are learning to read, they should listen to and talk about books that include words beyond those they can read for themselves. When they can read, they are then more likely to have sufficient vocabulary and other knowledge to understand the books they can read for themselves.

⁴⁰ Standards and Testing Agency (2018). '[Teacher assessment frameworks at the end of key stage 1. For use from the 2018/19 academic year onwards.](#)' London: STA

⁴¹ This might not be the case, however, for children new to speaking English, who may not understand many of the words.

Audit: Assessment

	Current practice
Teachers understand the difference between formative and summative assessment in relation to reading.	
Teachers use formative assessment throughout a lesson.	
Leaders use summative assessments to plan professional development.	
Teachers understand the specific purpose of the phonics screening check.	
Reading comprehension is not assessed until a child is a fluent reader.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	



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